Thrivecast Episode 48: Community Partnerships in Educational Spaces

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help school of medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek and today we're joined by Dr. Estell Williams. Dr. Williams is an assistant professor and the vice chair for diversity, equity and inclusion in the Department of Surgery.

She's also the Executive Director of the Center for Workforce Inclusion and Healthcare System Equity in the UW Medicine Office of Healthcare Equity. And while Estell, I'm excited to talk to you anytime, I really brought you here to talk about the work that you do through WIHSE and kind of learnings from that experience.

So thanks so much for joining us today.

Estell Williams: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to inform the broader UW Medicine community about the work that I'm doing and hopefully impart some wisdom and help them get involved more if they're interested.

Trish Kritek: I think there is no doubt that you will impart some wisdom, and I know there's people who want to be more involved.

So I mentioned this, the Center for Workforce [00:01:00] Inclusion and Healthcare System equity, and I said, it's called WIHSE and I bet there are people who don't know about WIHSE. So let's start off by just talking about what that is because that's going to lead into kind of the stuff I want to talk about more with you today.

Estell Williams: Yeah. Thank you for that. So I would be remiss if I didn't start with just a bit of history to understand what WIHSE was born out of, because I always think framing that and giving that historical context is helpful. I would agree. Yeah. WIHSE was developed initially using a single program, which is our doctor for a day program.

Doctor For a Day was developed in 2012 by a prior medical student. Dr. Joy Nguyen. Dr. Nguyen is still in the area practicing as a family medicine physician out of both Kaiser and country doctor. And really Dr. Nguyen wanted to create, as a resident born and raised in Seattle and particularly South Seattle, recognized the gap that [00:02:00] she experienced in the educational system and as a resident and long term community member that there was not a lot of influence. There wasn't a lot of individuals who are engaging with that community to teach her about medicine, health care, and she had a strong interest even at a young age. And so once she was able to matriculate into the medical school, really wanted to do something about it.

And so developed and dreamed up this program. Where our paths cross is that as I was graduating from the medical school here at UW and entering into my internship, Dr. Nguyen was developing this program. And I, as someone who has benefited from these programs, I'm the first in my family to go to college and participated in these sorts of programs.

And they were critical in helping me develop and get the mentorship that I needed to enter into my profession. And I say, it got me to where I am today. We had that very similar background and

kindred, sort of ethos, [00:03:00] and passion for working within community and with students who are traditionally underrepresented in medicine, economically and educationally disadvantaged.

And so really wanting to be engaged in this work, I started volunteering as an intern, helping to bring doctor for a day to life as a once a week, once a month Saturday Academy. That was, you know, really a grassroots effort to be out in community, particularly south end communities and greater Seattle communities in order to kind of take the white ivory tower out into the community.

Trish Kritek: I so appreciate you starting with doc for a day, because obviously that's where my entry into this space with you was and I had the privilege of being part of doc for a day, particularly interestingly during the pandemic, but even before that, which was great. And that's really the focus of what I want to talk about today, which will lead into WIHSE in a second, and that is this outreach to our communities to engage learners at much earlier ages about thinking [00:04:00] about careers and health care professions and science and bringing that experience to folks who, as you said, are underrepresented in both the medicine and science and really starting to open doors.

When we know we really need to open the doors, which is way before people are in college or thinking about graduate school or medical school. It's way upstream from there. So, okay. So there's doc for a day, which I appreciate your acknowledgement of kind of the roots of doc for a day. How does that lead to WIHSE?

Estell Williams: So, the WIHSE program and center was really developed in order to create what I like to call an ecosystem of support for students that can follow them along their entire educational career arc. While it's great to engage students in this once a month, Saturday Academy, we recognize that students need longitudinal support to continue to help them as they continue to grow along their educational careers.

Recognizing that there is no pipeline, right? We try and move away from that language of pipeline one, because we're respectful for indigenous brothers and sisters and their [00:05:00] fight against pipelines. And what that actually does to destroy communities. And that's from the community, the intentional community approach of the language that we use.

But also really just understanding that there is no singular path into medicine and I don't care what background you come from. We all recognize that within our health care careers, all of us, I don't care if you're an allied health or medicine or dentistry or pharmacy, whatever path you have. It does not look exactly like the person next to you.

And it was not linear. You didn't start at point A, and end up at point D, and it was the straight path along the way. You got different opportunities and you engaged in different parts of your own personal career development that were important to you. And so when you recognize even more barriers that students have that are coming from communities that are traditionally disenfranchised, they need different levels of support.

And so it's not going to be a linear path for those students, but the way in which I like to envision it as an ecosystem is that sometimes you need to water the soil. Sometimes you need a [00:06:00] little sun. Sometimes you need to have some wind blow in order to pollinate some seeds elsewhere. And so it really requires different things at different times, and it looks different for the tree in the forest versus the little mouse that's running around and burrowing in the soil, right? There are different needs for different parts of this ecosystem. And that's the same thing with these students.

And so really, how do you create an infrastructure of support that can offer that level of engagement so that people can truly thrive and enter in a career that is meaningful for them instead of it being a one size fits all approach.

And that's what it centers on.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate that both the kind of longitudinal aspect as well as the variability and types of and timing of support for folks because everyone's going to be their own individual. With that in mind. And you've thought about this a lot. What's the ideal age of learner to engage?

And, and I know the answer could be, you know, people can engage at any point in [00:07:00] time. But, but if you could kind of write the script, when would you start?

Estell Williams: You know, that is something that we have data that supports and lets you know exactly when. And the important part for any student that's entering into a STEM space, data has already shown that actually engaging students at the elementary school level, starting at about the third grade, is key, pivotal in order to provide a strong foundation for them to be engaged, especially within the STEM space and the math and science courses that they will need to thrive in in order to be successful when you're trying to enter STEM-based careers.

We also know when you're thinking about this from an intentional approach, and that's something I really lean on because, yes, we recognize that from an educational standpoint, you have to get the bear the foundation. You have to be able to do well in some of these science courses, but then you have to think about it from what deck of cards is this student been dealt and when you're really trying to increase the pool of applicants who are coming from economically and educationally disenfranchised communities.

We also recognize that there [00:08:00] is an entire infrastructure that is built on under educating students, particularly students of color. And so when you have our prison industrial complex that determines the number of prisons they're going to build based on the community's local third grade reading level.

That lets you know that if you're not investing earlier in your students to ensure that they're able to achieve educationally, you're actually going to continue to subjugate them and force them into cycles of poverty where they can't thrive and find careers that are meaningful to them. So, just based on the data, I really will say elementary school, definitely by the third grade level, we need to start engaging these students.

If you're really trying to bring in those voices of those who have been disenfranchised and not often brought into these types of careers to change the way in which we do medicine and healthcare.

Trish Kritek: And that's really helpful. I spent a lot of time in when I was a medical student working with sixth graders.

And now I'm like, Ooh, maybe it was, they were a little too late, which is crazy to think, but really helpful to understand. I think as we talk about this, [00:09:00] I have talked with lots of faculty who are interested in doing this type of work. They want to engage folks to think about different careers in healthcare and science and are interested in and committed to a more diverse workforce.

And so I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about one, how people might partner and collaborate with WIHSE and two, what are kind of the key principles that people are interested in doing this type of work? What are you centering when you, when you enter into this space?

Estell Williams: Yeah, thank you for that. And that's a very important question.

I'll start with the second one before I address the first because I think it'll lead in nicely. So really you have to think about sustainability. That's the key. Because at the end of the day, we have passions and we can be very engaged and want to have an impact on this community. But if we develop new programs, and we don't think about how we're going to sustain it long term in the end, it ends up hurting those students because it feels like they're not worth the investment.

There was a program that was around, it stayed around for one or two years, and then it [00:10:00] went away. And now we don't have it anymore. And so you really have to think about how can I sustain this long term? Because I ideally would like my job to go away one day. Hopefully we have an educational system. We have a health care community that reflects the populations that it serves.

And we, as a community educate all students, they can reach their full potential, regardless of whatever demographic economically or otherwise that they may come from. But until we reach that point, we need these programs to help support scholars. And so really, it's about being very thoughtful about what you're developing and ensuring that you're thinking about that long term sustainability.

So, then that goes into how do you partner with WIHSE and really we created this center with the idea that we take programs out of silos. There are a lot of different programs that exist across our system. Currently, as it exists right now, we really try to find ways that we can connect. And know about these programs, we don't have to be the end all be all that runs every single program, but [00:11:00] at least being able to funnel students.

So, as they come into the WIHSE center, they engage in our programs, they express an interest in something we can direct them to the neuroscience program. That's run out of the departments of neurology and neurosurgery, where they can do research and engage with neurologists and neurosurgeons. We can direct them to the medicine lab, pathology, undergraduate research experience that they have.

So that students can go and engage in that if they express an interest around that. But we also recognize that it's very hard from an administrative standpoint. In order to run a lot of these programs, and from a grant funding standpoint, most grants now want to see interdisciplinary and team based projects and not one individual program or one individual department trying to run a program.

And so we recognize that we are stronger when we work together and as a cohort or group, and one prime example I can bring up is the program bright up. It was recently called the summer medical education research program. And it was started by Dr. Claudia Morena and Dr. Beraki in our biomedical sciences in [00:12:00] the school of medicine, and they developed a summer high school research program where high school students come in at ninth grade and can start doing real basic science research and learn about research as a career.

But they also started running to issues with their ability to fund that program. And so they came to our center and we said, this is exactly what we exist for. We want to be able to create a bigger community. And so, in connecting with WIHSE, we now have a research component as a part of our WIHSE continuum.

And so high school students who have done doctor for a day programs. We then have them apply into the bright up program to do research, and then they can apply. Into our program that focuses on more clinical hands-on experience, and then from there, as they graduate from high school, they participate in our summer health professions, education program when they're rising sophomores in college and continually engage with them until they're successful into whatever career path they want.

So, we want to continue to expand that. If you have an [00:13:00] interest, we want to be able to bring in those. different programs, those different inches and expand the entire community of exposure that we've developed within our center.

Trish Kritek: I really appreciate that because I think there are lots of people with ideas.

And I want to come back to the first thing that you said, which is sustainability matters. I had a podcast earlier this year with Dr. Shaquita Bell, who talked about the same thing when you partner with communities to deliver healthcare and like. You can't show up for a little bit and then disappear. I think the exact same thing is true with, with this kind of engagement of learners.

So I think the sustainability WIHSE helps with that. And then I think you talked so nicely about an ecosystem and then you just described an ecosystem where people are growing longitudinally and taking different paths, and I'm going to encourage all our listeners, if this is an area of interest to reach out to Dr. Williams and the folks in WIHSE to think about how you can be part of that ecosystem, I really appreciate that.

And you already answered my next question, which is I keep saying folks who are underrepresented in medicine and science. [00:14:00] And I know that doc for a day was kind of anchored in health care, but it sounds like we're expanding to also think about experiences across the healthcare field, not just in medicine, but also into doing science research. Is that right?

Estell Williams: Yes, that's exactly right. And the way in which we try and explain it to scholars and to partners who partner with us is understanding that there's so many ways to have an impact on the health of a community, and it doesn't look one way.

And so we need diversity within our physical therapist and occupational therapist. We need diversity within our respiratory therapist. We need diversity within our radiology techs, our anesthesia techs. And we also recognize that these can be entry level positions that can, for those who are coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to let them get meaningful employment that can help take care of their families as well as real job exposure and experience. I can help them further define their career path as they continue on.

And for the research part, a lot of our students have a very limited [00:15:00] scope of one, what research actually is. And they haven't been encouraged to think about themselves as researchers,

and we're really trying to dispel the myth around what it means to be a researcher in community recognize.

There's so many ways in which you can engage in research that isn't always just bench lab science. And that's also a component of what we do within our programs from both the program and the program is do community-based team science projects that expose them to what it looks like to be an. And to do advocacy research to do different forms of community based participatory research and really expand their knowledge of what is possible and how they can be intentionally engaged in community to answer questions about problems that they see and how it can be borne out.

So, we really want to open the eyes of our students to all the different possibilities and ways in which they can show up to improve the communities from which they come.

Trish Kritek: If people weren't already excited about doing this work, I can't imagine you haven't made them excited about doing this work. I will ask you one last kind of [00:16:00] focused question and that is, what do you see as the kind of biggest challenges in this space?

And maybe, you know, some of it is that you can't show up and not stay, that sustainability. But like, for you, doing this work, what's the hardest part? What are the challenges?

Estell Williams: Being honest, the challenges really are building a team, so it's taken me a while to build a strong team of individuals. You know, I've now crafted a team of implementation researchers who are helping from a curriculum standpoint to make for sure that we are being thoughtful about, you know, the curriculum that we're presenting from our students and using, like, the double framework that carry students along their educational continuum into their professional schools and thinking about how are we implementing real evidence based curriculum that's supported to help our students.

Research team really did publish our outcomes, you know, outcomes is where grants come from. And when you do this type of work, you know, especially starting at the elementary school level that I'm talking about, it's going to take 15 years or so before you materialize and get show real outcomes.

So being thoughtful about, how, what are the ways, what are the questions can we answer and so thinking about self-efficacy [00:17:00] from the student standpoint. Thinking about from the standpoint of those who engage in our volunteer base, so the physicians, the residents that actually engage with our programs and how that helps from a wellness and burnout standpoint.

And, you know, really being able to ask those questions and publish on that. And that's one critical thing I'm working on right now. And then I'd be lying if I didn't say the money, right? Like, this is a very hard space to get grant funding for. You know, I'm going through a string right now where I've gotten like, five rejections, but you keep going.

And so hope for me, pray for me that it turns around and I'll get that next. You know, we just submitted another grant, but really, it's just trying to find the funding to help continue to support the wonderful people that I get to work with that are just as passionate about doing this work. So we can continue to engage from a staffing standpoint to support all the projects that we do and to make for sure that we can get to you to show up for our students.

Trish Kritek: I would be remiss if I didn't say I have a whole podcast on the fact that it's completely normal to apply for lots of grants and not get them. And so I know you will get funded. And I also want to acknowledge that maybe there's not as many funding [00:18:00] opportunities in this space. So both I think are probably true.

I also want to say maybe you're a listener out there kind of contemplating how you could get involved in maybe part of what you love to do is write books. Things and do the research about education. So you could reach out to Estell about that as well. Cause I know that that's an important part of the team.

I do want you to share what you're learning because I think you're doing amazing work. And so I appreciate that. That's a priority. This is hard work though. And I appreciate you talking through some of the stickier spots of it. As you move forward, you have imparted as I knew you would much wisdom. And I'm wondering if you have one last pearl for folks who are interested in doing work in this space.

Estell Williams: You know, the biggest thing that I would impart upon people is that we gain so much more from these students than I had ever imagined. We learn so much from them from their resiliency from their commitment to community. And I will say the biggest thing that I've had people realize that we underestimate a lot [00:19:00] of these students, and we don't recognize the curiosity they carry, the intelligence they carry, despite the circumstance they come from.

And I think that the biggest thing I've learned from a lot of individuals who after they've engaged in or learned from or interacted with some of these students, as they always come back and said, I wasn't prepared for how smart and on it these kids would be like, they asked me questions that like, residents ask, and I say, you can't underestimate, you know, any of these students are coming through the door and you can't underestimate potential because it could come up from any background shape form. And so, you know, they, these students deserve investment and I feel so privileged that I could be a part of the journey to help give them that.

Trish Kritek: I so appreciate that. And in my small experiences with doc for a day at a hundred percent resonates and talk about getting reinvigorated about the work you do is working with the learners in your many programs. I think really reminds people why we signed up in the first place. So I really appreciate that [00:20:00] and really appreciate all that you shared today.

Thank you so much for joining us.

Estell Williams: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity and look forward to connecting with anyone who heard this podcast and maybe lit a fire for them that want to do some of this too.

Trish Kritek: That's our goal. I want to say thanks again and tell everyone, in addition to listening to this podcast, if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

You can also find them at the UW School of Medicine faculty website at https://faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks for listening and have a great day.